

Conversation with Christopher Bache

Christopher Bache, an emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, is author of *Dark Night, Early Dawn: Steps to a Deep Ecology of Mind*, *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness*, and *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the Web of Life*, as well as *Diamonds from Heaven* (forthcoming, Inner Traditions, 2019), which describes his twenty-year journey working with high doses of LSD in rigorous, therapeutically structured sessions. In this conversation, he joins Arthur Versluis and Morgan Shipley to discuss his work and its radical implications for sociocultural change.

Arthur Versluis (AV): In *JSR*, we periodically do these wide-ranging conversations in which we're thinking more broadly about either the radical implications of something or radicalism more specifically. One of the contextual things that we wanted to start with is, in *JSR*, from the beginning of the journal, we've defined radicalism as characterized by the desire for sudden transformations in society through either nonviolent or violent means. To what extent do you think psychedelics lend themselves to the radical or sudden transformation of society? In other words, in brief, is the psychedelics movement itself radical? Are psychedelics? Do they have radical implications?

Christopher Bache (CB): Certainly, in our cultural and historical context, they would seem to have radical implications since our dominant philosophical paradigm is reductive materialism, and psychedelics cut through that. Psychedelics break through many of our cultural norms, including religious, philosophical, and even some scientific norms. They reconnect us with a deep experience of the universe. And that in itself is a radicalizing process—to actually experience firsthand the intelligence that seems to be the driving intelligence of the universe. How could that not be radical? Especially when our culture says there is no such intelligence and yet experience says, yes, there is such an intelligence and we can have contact with it. So yes, I think it's radical.

AV: It's radical in the individual sense, in terms of upending preconceptions on a whole variety of different levels. But to what extent is it radical—are the implications radical—with regards to society more broadly?

CB: I think that really depends on how we use them and incorporate them into our culture. My focus has been on using psychedelics in carefully structured sessions as a method of philosophical inquiry. But if we begin to systematically incorporate psychedelics into our culture more broadly, then I think they could contribute to a collective social revolution. Our first experience with psychedelics in the 1960s was convulsive; we didn't have the cultural structures to handle them wisely. So the expectation that they would trigger radical social change was premature. But if we begin to harness these substances conscientiously, then they would have broader social ramifications. Just the experience of nonduality, the experience of oneness, or opening the heart to deep identification with other life forms could have profound ramifications if it became common cultural currency.

Morgan Shipley (MS): I think what you're saying is, in terms of the 1960s specifically, there was that very personal experience often connected to, for instance, the Harvard Psilocybin Project or the broader sense of therapy, but it was always very personal and people who had the experiences you are talking about believed that, because I have had this one experience, I can now leap into the social world and make instant change. But I think

there is this gap, that if the rest of the cultural setting is not conducive to thinking differently about how we relate to people, then it becomes an outlier, taboo, or convulsive, so it is interesting to think about how we would have to situate this more directly within our cultural lens, as not something that we do just to escape our culture, but something we do to get more directly involved.

CB: Yes, exactly. I think initially psychedelics might have the most immediate impact on intellectuals and then as these intellectuals assimilate their experiences and extract from them theoretical reflections on the nature of reality, this would ripple out into the broader culture. When we eventually have scientists doing serious psychedelic work alongside the humanists, new levels of conversation would open. Right now, we are in the very early stages of this transformation.

MS: It's interesting: yesterday I was asked to do a lecture on Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, and I decided to base it on a quotation about how accessing the mind at large can be the way we change how we perceive each other and how we perceive our world, and he actually says this would be incredibly important for everybody, especially the intellectual. Huxley is sometimes placed within this elitist positioning, but I think that misses the way that this has to be translated to a broader audience who has maybe not thought about those implications, about nonduality or oneness. How do you see this process of shifting from an avenue of exploration that might turn people off because it's still associated with drugs, to an avenue of exploration that might require us to think more deeply about ourselves? How would we translate that into a broader culture practice that would help bridge that gap between those who are in the know and those who need to be in the know?

CB: You're asking me questions that I haven't thought a great deal about because my work has been very much a philosopher's individual journey. I haven't thought through the social process by which these radical experiences might be translated into a larger, collective awareness. So, winging it, I tend to think of it coming through intellectual channels first, because I am an academic. I think when we begin to make psychedelic experiences

more available legally, those who are trained in different disciplines will begin to recognize the ramifications of these experiences for their respective disciplines. If they become convinced of the significance of these experiences, then it would lead to more opportunities for others to have access to these experiences. More opportunities to access psychedelic states of consciousness in safe and controlled settings would lead to further social distribution of these experiences. But I'm naive about the social demographics of social transformation and am just speculating about what might happen. I think many young people are not waiting for this intellectual shift. The psychedelic festivals across the country indicate that they are jumping in hard, maybe too hard, and they are already living within an alternative cultural context around psychedelics.

MS: We have a geodesic dome being built down here on campus, and so I was thinking about Burning Man, which, to your point right there, illustrates a sense in which you do have spaces within our culture in which people are really willing to throw themselves fully into it. But the background is that you also have people who are simply there to watch and provide help in order to maintain that capacity to go down routes of exploration and not get trapped. When thinking how we translate it from a personal experience to something that's more social or communal, do you think we have to return to some of that early 1960s emphasis on things like set and setting, or the role of the guide, someone who can be there to help make sure that the individual is identifying the tracks that could lead to that radical shift in our perspective?

CB: Definitely yes to set and setting, but I have mixed feelings about the concept of a guide. The idea of someone "guiding" someone else's psychedelic experience doesn't jibe with my experience. I think it is important to have a strong set and setting and there are therapeutic conventions around this. If you're going to dissolve your psychological boundaries and push your system into radically amplified conditions, then it's important to control the environment carefully. To me, this is essential for the safe use of psychedelics. In the 1960s I don't think we had enough of that, so we got into problematic territory which cost us a lot of time. I think Timothy Leary cost the psychedelic movement decades. As we move

forward, I would like to see clinics where individuals can do this type of work safely. If we had a national network of clinics where people could do psychedelic work under safe conditions, that would seed deep cultural change on many levels. Once these experiences become part of our culture, you can't put them back in the bottle.

AV: One of the things that we wanted to talk about is how you, at the beginning, came to be working with high doses of LSD as a beginning religious studies professor. We know that Stanislav Grof had something to do with it, but maybe you could talk about your own experience, these sessions that you undertook with high doses of LSD, and how that came to be?

CB: I'm the last person you would think would ever do high-dose LSD work. I came from a very traditional background. I was raised a Roman Catholic in the deep South, was a seminarian in high school, and studied theology at Notre Dame, New Testament criticism at Cambridge, and philosophy of religion at Brown. I came out of graduate school an atheistically inclined agnostic. I was well trained in the rise of science and the eclipse of religion in the West. Then, when I started my university career, I met two people whose work changed my life. One was Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia. His research convinced me that reincarnation is a fact of life. I found his evidence persuasive. The other person was Stanislav Grof, who had an even more profound effect on me. I read his book, *Realms of Human Unconscious*, in 1978, two years after it came out, and in that reading I found my life's work. I immediately recognized the significance of Grof's research not just for psychology but for philosophy as well. I believed that the philosophers of religion who would be making the most important contributions to their field in the near future would be people writing out of an experiential basis, not simply an intellectual basis. But to write out of an experiential basis you have to cultivate the experiences.

So I made a difficult choice. Because LSD was illegal at the time, I decided to learn Grof's methods for doing LSD psychotherapy and to use them in my private life to explore the deeper dimensions of my own mind, and ultimately the mind of the universe itself. Initially I did three moderate dose sessions, about 250 micrograms, and then chose to work with much higher doses, 500 to 600 micrograms. At first, this was just

for reasons of efficiency. It was hard to find time to do this work in a dual-career marriage and I wanted to take maximum advantage of each session. At the time, I was still thinking in terms of a model of private transformation, that this work was aimed at my personal transformation only. That model dissolved along the way, but after it did, I continued to work with high doses of LSD because it took me where I wanted to go and then further than I imagined possible.

I want to say that I don't recommend that people do what I did. First, I don't recommend that people break the law, but putting the legal issue aside, if I were starting this work over again knowing what I know now, I would take a gentler approach. I would incorporate more low-dose sessions into the mix. But, basically, what I ended up doing was a long series of therapeutically focused, high-dose LSD sessions—seventy-three sessions between 1979 and 1999. In Stan Grof's work at Spring Grove Hospital in Baltimore, high-dose therapy sessions were limited to three sessions. They were working with people who were facing imminent death from an incurable disease. The therapists were trying to help them come to terms with their impending death by triggering a near-death type of experience. I assumed that if you could do one to three high-dose sessions safely, you could increase the number of sessions without increasing the risk. What I learned, however, was that when you start multiplying the number of sessions, new challenges open up that did not show up in this early work, but also new opportunities.

In order to do this work, I had to divide my life into two parts. In my daytime job, I was a conventional university professor, teaching my courses, doing the things professors usually do. But in my nighttime job, I stepped into a circle of secrecy and began this long course of LSD therapy. Though the method derived from Stan Grof's therapeutic work with LSD, I did this work not as a clinician but as a philosopher. I did it to explore the deep structure of consciousness and our universe. It turned out that this was a much longer journey and larger project than I had anticipated in the beginning. When psychedelics are used carefully and critically in this manner, I believe they represent a major turning point in philosophy. This is a new philosophical method. We are only beginning to explore its philosophical potential.

AV: To some extent, when you're using that term *philosophy* here, I think you're using it in the sense of Plotinus, for example. Plotinian philosophy is not the same as analytic philosophy. It is much more holistic, and Plotinus is engaged in exploration in a way that's analogous to what you're talking about. You're really tying back to an earlier philosophical tradition that has to do with experiential dimensions of philosophy, not strictly intellectual philosophy. Is that right?

CB: Yes. I was trained as an analytic philosopher. But when you create the conditions that allow this deep, unrestricted exploration of consciousness to take place, the results transcend the expectations of analytic thought. You end up affirming many of the insights and values of this earlier Neoplatonic tradition.

AV: What are the protocols? If you're talking about a consciousness observatory, or contemplative observatories, which is Alan Wallace's term. He says his goal is to set up contemplative observatories around the world—he has one on the Italian coast, one in Santa Barbara. What are the protocols of that? In other words, you discuss in *Dark Night, Early Dawn* the importance of protocols for consciousness observation, exploration, developing a scientific framework for consciousness studies, observation or recording in this regard. Could you elaborate on that?

CB: In my sessions, I tried to standardize the work as much as possible, to keep the constants high and the variables low. So after the first three sessions, all of my work was done at the same dosage level and followed the same protocol. My sessions always began in the early morning and lasted all day. They were all solo sessions. I always worked with the same sitter, a clinical psychologist. I was in a safe environment completely protected from outside interruptions. I was lying down, wearing eyeshades, and listening to music that was carefully selected to support the stages of the opening and closing of the session. By staying internally focused and not engaging the outside world, the experience is intensified and you know that whatever you are confronting is coming entirely from within.

After the session is over, the second part of the protocol begins and that is to write a complete and phenomenologically accurate account

of your session within twenty-four hours. Because non-ordinary states have a short half-life, it's important to record your experiences as soon as possible, especially if you are working at dosage levels that push your psychological boundaries hard. In order to increase the quality of recall, I developed a strategy. While I was writing up my account the day after a session, I would replay the music that had been used inside the session. I'd play each piece over and over until I felt I had captured the essence of the experience I had had with this music, then I would move on to the next segment. The day after a session, your cognitive capacities have come back online but you're still psychologically porous around the edges. By listening to the music while I was in this "one foot in, one foot out" condition, I found that recall was improved. By following this same protocol month after month, a systematic deepening of the visionary conversation takes place. A cognitively coherent, well structured dialogue begins to unfold between the consciousness doing the exploring (me) and the consciousness being explored.

When I did this work, I always had the sense of engaging a consciousness that radically transcended my personal consciousness. As I have been analyzing my sessions to write *Diamonds from Heaven*, I've come to see layers of organization and structure in them beyond what I recognized when I was first doing them. High-dose psychedelic sessions can be very complex, intertwining many levels of consciousness and adding layer after layer of content as the work progresses. It takes time and careful analysis to untangle their many threads and identify the emerging narrative over thirty, forty, or more sessions. This is why standardization of the protocol is so important to eliminate as many variables as possible, followed by critical assessment. This is what I mean by the rigorous use of psychedelics as a philosophical method.

AV: I'm not aware of anyone else who's done the same thing.

MS: Not that systematically.

Going back to what you said about Leary putting us back, if we go to that very early period—late 1950s, early 1960s—where you have Humphrey Osmond or the Harvard Psilocybin Project, I think they maybe had a similar focus or intent of trying to systematize it so that

if we have person *A* come in and person *B*, and if we set it up all in the same way, we can start then maybe seeing if there are overlaps between their experiences. But I think, and I'm just wondering what you think of this, that early psychedelic research shifted from trying to focus it and control it to more just chasing the experience. So, you start having in the 1960s all these accounts, you have Huxley in 1954—I mean that's really early—you have Leary writing the psychedelic prayers, but by the time you get to the late 1960s, the need to sit back after the experience and recount what you went through, to try and understand it and put it on paper, seems to go away. Do you think that has caused us to miss the impact of psychedelics? That what we do is that we are willing to chase the experience, but we're maybe not willing to take the time because of the pressure it puts on us, or the difficulty, to try to wade through those moments of convergence, but sometimes those moments of divergence?

CB: Yes, and right now the popular psychedelics are often short-acting psychedelics, not the long-acting psychedelics of those early years. Today it seems that people often want a quick psychedelic experience. "Give me a fifteen or thirty-minute high and get me out of there so I can still make my meeting by 2:30," you know what I mean?

[laughter]

CB: That "quick in, quick out" approach is very different from the traditional indigenous approach to psychedelic experience, which is "the longer the better."

I don't know how to explain all the changes that you're pointing to in our orientation to psychedelics. It's useful to remember that Huxley wrote *The Doors of Perception* after only one mescaline experience and he took psychedelics only ten times during his life. Huston Smith wrote *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* after only a half-dozen LSD experiences. After that, he said the negative experiences increased, leading him to adopt Alan Watts's advice, "When you get the message, hang up the phone." That's all well and good, but it doesn't take you very far down the *Kykeon* path. It doesn't explore the deeper potential that emerges with twenty, thirty, or forty sessions.

I think part of the answer also is that after psychedelics were made illegal in 1970, psychologists simply couldn't study them anymore. Stan Grof had a massive body of data from his early work, but after 1970 he developed Holotropic Breathwork as a non-drug method for entering non-ordinary states of consciousness. Holotropic Breathwork is a powerful method, but it's not as powerful as full-blown, high-dose psychedelic work, so it tends to aggregate the data towards the lower end of the spectrum. We weren't pushing the outer boundaries as far as some early researchers did. In addition, when psychedelic research was stopped and the clinical protocols were halted, psychedelic usage went underground and often became more recreational, I think, which led to less critical analysis of people's experiences. My work was part of this underground movement but I tried to bring the same rigor to it that I had been trained in as a philosopher of religion.

When I was doing my psychedelic work, I was working in isolation in Ohio. I simply assumed that other people were continuing to do this work with LSD despite its illegal status. I mean, this is philosophical gold, right? But when *Dark Night, Early Dawn* came out and I began to teach at the California Institute of Integral Studies in California, I began to realize, to my surprise, that not many people were doing this work in the same aggressive, systematic way that I was. As I have continued to bring my work forward, what I'm being told is that no one has pushed this method quite as hard with as much critical focus as I have. So I've been surprised to find that there aren't as many people pushing this edge as I had thought there were. But perhaps I simply haven't found them yet.

MS: I was even thinking, as you were just saying that, about the Acid Tests: this notion that I could walk into this space, dose, be overwhelmed with everything Ken Kesey is throwing at me, and then I could pass the test. It's almost like, if I can survive the experience, I am transformed. But I think the real work might begin, to borrow from William James, by looking at the fruits—if I don't take that time to really dig deep into that experiential core, then all I'm doing is staying at that surface level, just chasing that surface level experience.

CB: I think that's right. What we're finding, I think, is that it's gotten relatively easy to crack open the shell of the psyche. We have all sorts of powerful

neurochemical technologies that allow us to blow open the ego pretty fast with a pretty high degree of reliability. The real challenge is integration. How much of our experience in non-ordinary states can we hold on to and make productive use of? That's a much more demanding process. It's not just a matter of breaking out of spacetime reality and having a deep experience of the spiritual universe, but rather how much of that experience can we bring back and integrate intellectually and spiritually into our day-to-day lives. That's a much trickier process.

When I completed my psychedelic work in 1999, Spirit said to me in meditation, "twenty years in, twenty years out," which meant that it would take twenty years for me to digest the experiences that I had been given in my twenty years of work. My first thought was, "That sounds about right." Now that I'm approaching this twenty-year mark, however, I'm beginning to think that this might have been an optimistic expectation. Sometimes I think that one lifetime will not be enough to integrate all the experiences that I was given in those twenty years. And I think this reflects a larger issue that we're coming to see more clearly now. We have the capacity to open ourselves up to experiences that are so deep and so profound that we are just beginning to have the conversation about what the genuine integration of these experiences looks like.

As long as our sessions stay close to the familiar world, uncovering the pains of our past, we have therapeutic models for how to integrate them. Similarly, indigenous cultures working with peyote and psilocybin mushrooms developed methods for integrating their experiences. But when we now have newer, more powerful psychoactive agents that allow us to push deep into the universe far beyond spacetime, integration becomes a more pressing issue. How do we integrate experiences of what I call Deep Time (deep trans-temporal experiences) into our time-space reality? How do we integrate experiences of the Infinite into our finite being? The further we drive consciousness into previously unexplored domains, the more integration becomes a critical issue.

AV: The topic of integration ties in with something else that I wanted to bring up. When I was in graduate school, I lived in a communal house. Huge farmhouse, now gone, and I think there were nine or ten of us in there. And one of them was a woman who followed the Grateful Dead quite a

bit. She had sustained, in the course of that, some kind of damage. And Stephen Gaskin had talked about this also when—

MS: The Farm even outlawed LSD at some point.

AV: The outlawing of LSD ties in with people who really did sustain some kind of damage and this young woman that I'm thinking of is an example. I mean, she is functional, but it was clear that it was not entirely positive for her. Now, in Ayurvedic tradition, Indian medicine, psychedelics fall under the category of "fire," essentially fire in the mind. And what's said by Ayurvedic physicians is that a great deal of psychedelic use can cause a real diminution of *ojas*, which is "life force," life energy, and that is one of the things that can happen. I know Esalen represented, as a community, a place, a refuge for people to go and kind of rebuild. So, I don't want to dwell on this, but I do want to ask about it because it is something that I've both observed and that has reference points within the Ayurvedic, for example, medical tradition. What observations would you have about the risks of LSD usage?

CB: The psychedelic path is a tricky path. There seem to be more ways to do it wrong than to do it right. I've talked to a lot of students through the years who have had significant psychedelic experiences. Some have reported traumatic negative experiences which they dealt with in different ways, but even those who have had only positive experiences can get stuck trying to replicate those experiences. When you use psychedelics recreationally to chase the high, you can hurt your system. Too much fire is a good description. Occasionally I've seen psychedelic users that feel "fried" to me. They've lost some of the moistness in their personality, some of their groundedness.

Working with psychedelics using a therapeutic protocol as a serious spiritual or philosophical practice is a major undertaking. This is very different from tripping. Personally, I've never tripped or used LSD recreationally. All of my work was done in a therapeutic modality, about five sessions a year. I was also doing yoga, meditating, watching my diet, and staying grounded in the world. I was married, raising children, and teaching my courses. I also had the advantage of being trained in religious

studies, so I knew a fair amount about mysticism. I knew about going into retreat, coming back out, and integrating your experiences. The spiritual masters of our mystical traditions were always my mentors as I learned how to work with these states. They were my guides for how I organized my life around my psychedelic work. But even with all this preparation, I still made mistakes. I didn't have a shaman coaching me, so I had to figure things out as I went along. One of the reasons I'm writing this book is to help people avoid some of these mistakes.

AV: You're talking about *Diamonds from Heaven*?

CB: Yes, *Diamonds from Heaven*. In this book, I'm telling the story of my entire journey—what happened from the first session all the way through to the last.

MS: Could you talk maybe a little bit more about how you would define a *trip* or *tripping*? I always pick up on the sense that it lacks any type of modality. It's simply: I can take the substance and I'm going to be thrust into these worlds and I am going to be able to manage them. Kind of like going to a festival or a Dead show—this becomes almost part and parcel of the experience, that I'm not going to be able to experience this moment fully if I don't actually participate in this use of psychedelics. But that's not necessarily a modality; it's not necessarily a protocol in any sense other than almost an obligation. Do you think tripping became almost an escape? One of the critiques of the use of psychedelics is that it's used to escape as opposed to grounding ourselves.

CB: People use psychedelics in so many ways, I don't want to overgeneralize here. To me, *tripping* is simply using psychedelics in a nontherapeutic way. People trip in many different ways. Some people trip and go to a loud concert or dance. Other people take a psychedelic and go sit in nature where it's quiet and contemplative. Other people take a psychedelic and stay in social conversation with others. There are varying degrees of interiority in tripping.

The therapeutic use of psychedelics has a couple of distinguishing features. The first is, you isolate yourself. Even when you work in a small

group, you're internally isolated. You're lying down in a quiet protected place. This allows you to avoid complications coming from the outside world. If you stay active and engaged in the world, it's inevitably going to dilute your experience. In therapeutic work, you isolate yourself from the world, adopt a receptive posture, and then intensify the experience by listening to carefully selected music. Not the Grateful Dead, but unfamiliar music, exotic music, and nothing with English lyrics. You want music that helps you let go of your familiar world and open to the unknown.

This is the essence of therapeutic protocol. Complete isolation, intensification of awareness, and complete surrender. If you do this, a detoxification process begins. Everything you don't want to look at starts to come up, everything you don't want to face, don't want to think about. If you go to a concert and this detoxification process kicks in, it may not be a pretty experience and it may not end well. But in a therapeutic setting when this detoxification process kicks in, that, to me, is when the real work is done and interesting things start to happen. We have to face our shadow in order to get to the gold on the other side of the shadow.

MS: I was just thinking Burning Man and that kind of scene, because while the use of psychedelics is so tethered to that experience, the Zendo Project is a whole project of people who aren't going to participate with substances, but who go around and make sure that that sense of taking a substance and being too familiar with everything does not become unsafe—I think that's when you get to the point when it becomes uncomfortable, or start going down routes that you can't necessarily control. That sense of passiveness is quite fascinating, really interesting.

CB: Yes. I can think of 100 ways to get in trouble at Burning Man, but I have some friends who have gone to Burning Man and had very positive experiences there. Personally, Burning Man is the last place I would want to open up. My work is just different. Tripping is a very different agenda than deep therapeutic work.

MS: Absolutely. Given that, it's a question I have and one that I'm interested in because one of the things I tried to do in my own project was to trace out the way in which these substances have been labeled, how they've

turned into symbols in different ways: psychotomimetic, hallucinogens, psychedelics, entheogens. Do you see a need to discuss these substances in different ways? Is there a difference between a psychedelic and an entheogen? And is the difference not necessarily in the term itself, but more in the intention?

CB: I think that's a good exercise, to look at how our culture has thought about these substances and the categories that they have applied to them. *Hallucinogen* is clearly a pejorative misclassification. *Entheogen* is currently popular—"awakening the Divine within." It's a good term if you're comfortable with the theistic concept of the Divine, *theos*, which I'm not unless you put it through a series of filters. *Psychedelic* tends to carry cultural baggage from the 1960s—bell-bottom jeans, paisleys, and phosphorescent colors—but in terms of its core meaning, "mind-opening," it's the term I prefer. Different psychedelic agents have different properties—ayahuasca, LSD, psilocybin, *salvia divinorum*—but what they all have in common is this mind-opening, psyche-dilating quality. They do it in different ways and they open the psyche at different levels, but they are all mind-openers. So, yes, I think it's worthwhile to pay attention to the language we use for these substances.

AV: It is an interesting point you make about the term *entheogen* and, just parenthetically, about the tension between monotheistic and non-monotheistic approaches. I think, historically, non-monotheistic approaches have been much more congenial to psychedelics than monotheistic traditions. In fact, I think one of the effects historically has been deconstructive, so someone who is engaged in a pro-monotheistic perspective ends up in a somewhat non-monotheistic space as a result of psychedelics. That's just an observation. Another thing I wanted to discuss, at least briefly, because it comes up in your whole book, *Living Classroom*, and that is, we could call it the broader implications of some of the things we have been talking about, specifically in a classroom setting. Some of the phenomena that you discussed in *Living Classroom* have to do with shared consciousness, have to do with communication in the classroom because a classroom is a relatively close space where things can happen that are sometimes unexpected for everyone and I think anyone who

has taught experiences that. I've certainly experienced it. I teach a course regularly called "Magic and Mysticism" and I've many times come into the classroom, into that space, and created, through the exchange that happens, something entirely different than the students or I would have expected. That experience of learning is not necessarily quantifiable in terms of the information. It's not an informational phenomenon we're talking about—it's . . .

CB: Almost an activation.

AV: It is an activation—something happens. There is some kind of insight or set of insights that happen. We go in some direction that none of us expect and it's a very historically grounded course, it's very text-centered and a very specific kind of course, with specific questions, texts, individuals, and works that we're looking at, and yet sometimes something remarkable will happen. And no one really knows where that comes from and it only happens because of that collective space. So I wondered what you wanted to say about this really essentially radical vision of education, which, in an age of quantification and expectations of a practical outcome for everything, goes counter to that. It's a very different phenomenon that you're discussing in *Living Classroom*. I wanted to broach that because, in a conversation it's an important part of your work and I think you're the only one, again, who has written about this phenomenon of morphic fields in education.

CB: I don't mention psychedelics anywhere in the *Living Classroom* because that book is not about psychedelics. It's about the nature of consciousness itself. I'm exploring what happens when people come together and focus their consciousness in collaborative enterprises, what opens up between people in that setting. Classically, educators have been trained in what we might call an "atomistic pedagogy" an approach to teaching that emphasizes our separate, individual minds. In *The Living Classroom* I'm developing a "quantum pedagogy" that recognizes the subtle connectivity of minds and collective fields of consciousness.

The backstory to *Living Classroom* is this. I was doing my private psychedelic work and teaching my courses at the university. My students didn't know anything about my psychedelic work; I never talked about

it. I built a firewall between these two sides of my life. Nevertheless, I found that some of my students began to be activated by my psychedelic practice. When I would go through a powerful death-rebirth process in my work, I found that some of my students went through deep personal transformations in their own lives without any encouragement from me to do so. Or, for example, when I would be lecturing and need an example to illustrate some point I was making, I would simply reach into an emptiness and pull an example from my imagination. Then students began to come up to me after class and tell me that the example I had used was exactly what had happened to them that week. The deeper my psychedelic work went, the more frequent this synchronicity became, and it began to touch very sensitive areas in their lives, places where they needed healing or insight. I began to realize that my mind and my students' minds were becoming selectively porous to each other. The walls between our minds were coming down in meaningful ways. Some students also began to have deep spiritual openings around some of the concepts I was presenting in class, such as impermanence, interdependence, oneness, no-self, and the divine within. My experience of these realities in my sessions changed my energy in a way that caused my person to become a kind of lightning rod, triggering these kind of experiences in some of my students. They were being activated less by my words and more by an energetic resonance to my person. I was not trying to make this happen, and in fact I was quite concerned about it, but my students were demonstrating a simple, ancient truth—that states of consciousness are contagious. One person's awakening spontaneously triggers awakening in those around us. I think this is related to the experiential activation that you are pointing to, Arthur.

I also found that there was a second dynamic operating in my classroom. I came to see that there were *fields of consciousness* developing around my courses, something like Rupert Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields. These psychic fields reflect the cumulative learning of hundreds of students studying the same ideas semester after semester, year after year. These collective fields were getting stronger over time and accelerating and deepening the learning of later students.

The bottom line is that our minds are not the private, stand-alone entities that the modern paradigm says they are. Part of our mind is obviously private, but there is also a collective dimension to our minds.

When we focus our intention in collective projects, there is a resonance that is generated which rises underneath us and animates us.

In order to understand both these dynamics—energetic resonance and group fields—I spent many years carefully observing what was happening in my classroom and developing strategies for working with these forces. I think that we’re going to teach differently in the future. We are going to balance the atomistic perspective with a quantum perspective. It is a both/and situation, not an either/or. We’re going to use all the techniques of individual transfer that we have developed *plus* we’re going to use these subtler techniques of collective resonance to accelerate and deepen our students’ learning. I find it interesting that more excerpts and summaries of *The Living Classroom* have been published in journals and anthologies than anything else I’ve written. I think it’s because our culture is ready for this concept of collective consciousness.

AV: What would an educational, institutional structure look like that would better facilitate what you’re describing?

CB: I think something like Waldorf is as close as I’ve seen to what I’m envisioning—teaching as not just an intellectual enterprise but a spiritual enterprise. I see pieces of it in Montessori with its emphasis on teaching the whole student, a whole teacher engaging whole students.

I can tell you what it has looked like for me as I’ve learned to work with it. I’ve trained myself to always be operating at multiple levels when I teach. I prepare for my courses internally as well as externally. I prepare my inner life as well as my outer life. I do certain Buddhist practices for my students even before the course begins, as soon as I get the roster for the class. I also do these practices during the course and at end of the course for closure. I hold my students in my daily practice throughout the entire semester. I take the teaching process deeper, holding my students soul-to-soul as well as mind-to-mind. I’ve learned that if I hold my students as whole beings, teaching goes faster, deeper, and smoother.

MS: What’s interesting is when you think about the classroom experience itself, and it’s something that I strive to do: I want this kind of symbiotic relationship, because I’m implicated in this. Sometimes when we enter

into the classroom, especially at the university, it's very uni-dimensional. You sit there and receive the information—I'm not even calling it "knowledge"—I'm just giving you information, and you have to figure out on your own how to balance that and then answer strange questions that I throw at you to determine how well you know this information by how well you can regurgitate it. However, I don't think that, as instructors, we think about ourselves as actually implicated within the classroom itself, or recognize that we are active learners. I think that if we don't understand the reciprocity, which I think connects to maybe some of the lessons within the psychedelic experience, of going beyond duality, of seeing yourself within a broader viewpoint. You don't just see through your eyes; you can actually see through your students' eyes.

Just anecdotally, and then I want to hear a little bit more, but I am teaching Jewish mysticism. For me, it's an interesting class because the concepts can be so new, so to try to introduce these new concepts, one of the things we do early on is *chavruta*, essentially small group sessions looking at sacred texts. The first two weeks are really hard—students are like, "what are you throwing at me?" But then we do *chavruta* and the whole mood changes; the entire class shifts over. And to your point, all of the sudden students, in the middle of me talking, raise their hands and offer what I think this is a better example, which is often exactly what I was looking for. But I think maybe we do not allow ourselves, as instructors, to make ourselves vulnerable.

CB: Yes, I agree absolutely. Making ourselves vulnerable opens up new possibilities when we teach. This is how it first showed up for me. Once you've taught a course for several years, you've pretty much heard most of the questions you're likely to be asked. Even before a student had finished asking their question, I was already thinking of the answer I was going to give them. But I learned that if I stopped and didn't give the first answer that popped into my mind, if I waited for the second or the third answer that rose and used that instead, then something special would happen in the classroom, something that didn't happen if I went with my habitual response. My sense is that there is a deeper give and take that is always trying to take place between us and our students if we are open to it.

Let me expand this to a broader observation. Sometimes, I would read a book or have an experience, and shortly afterwards a student would show up in one of my classes with a particular question. If they had asked me this question a few weeks before, I would not have had anything to offer them. But receiving the question just when I did, I had something to give them. I'd share the information, the connection was made [*snaps fingers*], and something magical would happen in the exchange. When this had happened numerous times, I thought, "Isn't this interesting? The collective intelligence of the universe can somehow use my experience to transmit learning to others by creating these synchronistic opportunities." Then I realized that I was only seeing half of the picture, that it sometimes works the other way around. Sometimes it is precisely because there is a student coming to me with a particular question that leads me to read this book or have that experience. Their future question penetrates me and nudges me at the subtle level so that the answer they need will be available to them when we meet. The circle of learning between my ability to learn and communicate and their need to know is a circle with no fixed starting point. Once I began to appreciate this circle, I began to recognize that my career is not a private undertaking in which I'm simply distributing information to my students. My own learning is being subtly influenced by my students even as I'm preparing myself to teach them. It's a collective project from the very start.

MS: One of the things I incorporate into my classroom is exactly that point. I almost try to force myself not to get too comfortable. As students ask those familiar questions, especially as I teach the intro religion courses where I often feel I know exactly what they are going to say, so every day when they come in, the students are required to write questions up on the board. It creates a dynamic in which their perspective, what they were thinking in their internal minds as they were trying to work this material the night before, becomes now public. We're now sharing. I'm not just reading it, but the students are reading it, and it creates this dynamic in which I might have a full lecture and I think I'm going this route, and I just scrap it because of the questions they are asking. I like that feedback loop, that we're not just a uni-dimensional force, but if we allow for that kind of give and take, the learning process develops through reciprocity. It is fascinating.

CB: Yes. Dancing the dance. I love to be with my students because I never know where it's going to go. And, like you, I come in with lots of organized notes. I have an agenda. I know where I'm going to be in the twelfth week of the course because if we're not there in the twelfth week, we are not going to get done what I want to get done by the fifteenth week. So I'm very organized, and yet once I have that structure in place, we go live and then see where it goes.

[laughter]

AV: We've just got probably a few minutes left and there are a couple of things, a couple directions we could go. I had a cluster of questions that really boil down to future-looking questions, having to do with the fact that *Dark Night, Early Dawn* is really in many ways, I think, a kind of prophetic work by, in different senses of that term, looking toward changes in humanity. That is the magnitude of the book's scope, really. Because that's invoked by the book itself, I wondered if you have observations about what you are seeing since the book has been published and available for a while. What kind of future society or culture do you see emerging and what observations do you have about that? And then, Morgan, what did you have?

MS: I had a similar kind of question: what does a society or culture look like moving forward if we do make an active process, or protocol as you would use, that would allow us to not only explore these non-ordinary states of consciousness, but also reflect on them? Not just in the personal sense, but maybe to go back to our first questions, how might that influence the way we see a society or culture going forward?

CB: Now, if I am hearing your questions correctly, they strike me as both pointing to the future, but on different orders of a scale. Morgan, your question is about where we might take the psychedelic movement. And your question, Arthur, is about where nature is taking humanity, where the universe or history is taking us. That's a bigger question; we have less control over that question than we do over where we might take the psychedelic movement.

MS: The question I have is, in that recent interview you sent to Arthur, you talk about coming out of the closet, per se, with your work with psychedelics. What would it take for us collectively to move beyond that maligned status? If people are willing to undertake the kind of exploration that you did, how might we bring that more directly within our cultural frames so there is a broader conversation happening?

CB: Well, that's up to MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) and the people doing psychedelic research today. Basically, I think they are laying a strong foundation for the future use of psychedelics. They're going to publish more studies, there will be more and more people participating in these studies, and eventually psychedelics will begin to be incorporated as an adjunct therapy alongside traditional psychotherapy. This is where I think we're going. As we become more familiar with psychedelics as a therapeutic catalyst, somewhere along the way I think we're going to begin to see that psychedelics are also a philosophical catalyst and a spiritual catalyst. Eventually we're going to have clinics and opportunities for people to experience these substances not simply to end their alcoholism or PTSD, but to explore the deeper dimensions of their own beings. This will be a long, slow process. Personally, I don't think we're going to have the peace and quiet for this to take place at a conventional pace because I think history is coming to a boil—and this brings me to your larger question.

This was the biggest surprise that came out of my psychedelic work. When I began this journey, I was thinking in terms of a model of *individual* transformation, and yet my journey became saturated with themes of humanity's *collective* transformation. It began to show up about five years into the work and it kept returning, adding layer upon layer to the story. My visionary experience has consistently been that humanity is coming to an evolutionary tipping point, a profound breakthrough of our core capacities as a species. This breakthrough will change life on the planet as we know it. I know it sounds arrogant to speak like this, but this was the vision that came through my sessions.

Then, when I was writing *Dark Night, Early Dawn* in 1995, a very powerful session took me deep into the future and into the death and rebirth of our species. The collective convulsions I entered were

species-wide and appeared to be driven by a global systems crisis triggered by a global ecological crisis. I was not given any details about how or when this crisis would take place, but this session showed me the *fact* of a global crisis; it took me inside the *collective psyche's experience* of this crisis and showed me some of the *mechanisms of collective awakening* that will be activated by this crisis.

For there to be a great awakening of our species, there must first take place a great death of our species-ego. What I saw was that the twenty-first century will begin the dark night of our collective soul, a time of intense purification and transformation. I experienced humanity being brought to its knees as the ordinary structures of our lives were taken from us. We were losing control of our lives. For a time, it looked like our species would not survive this crisis, but just when it was at its peak, the worst of it passed. As the survivors began to pick themselves up, we found that we had been profoundly changed by these events. The foundation of the collective psyche, the archetypal form of *homo sapiens*, had shifted in response to the severity of this crisis. The story of this shift and Future Human that is emerging in history is a major theme of *Diamonds from Heaven*.

We don't have time for me to lay it out here, but my sessions gave me many insights into reincarnation, into a crescendo that is building in the cycle of reincarnation, and into the emergence a new baseline consciousness in history, what I call the birth of the Diamond Soul. I believe that the bifurcation point that the planet is coming to is synchronistically paired with a bifurcation point that the soul is coming to. I think that the global crisis we are entering will catalyze deep changes not only in how we live on this planet but also in the collective psyche of humanity itself. Once this shift takes place, all subsequent human beings will incarnate around a different master blueprint, so to speak.

I don't know when or how this will take place. For these things I look at the same data that you look at—at how high the oceans will rise by 2100 and the mass migrations that will take place. I look at the projections of how global climate change will change life on our planet. Like you, I ask: how many of our children and grandchildren are going to have to die before we will be willing to make the changes that we are not willing to make today? My visionary experience is that it is going to get very bad,

but that through this crisis we will give birth to a radically transformed human being: a human being healed of the scars of war and the terrible things we've done to each other through the centuries; a more conscious human being capable of deeper relationships and deeper communion with the creative intelligence of the universe; a more spiritually realized human being. This is the Future Human that I think we are trying to give birth to. This is what we're all working towards and why we are all here. This is the work of the hour. The most important thing we could possibly do now is to help humanity through this critical transition in history.

AV: These are the exact words with which we call this to a close! Thank you for the conversation.